

The Coronavirus pandemic could worsen inter-group relations in Israel – Or provide an opportunity for positive change

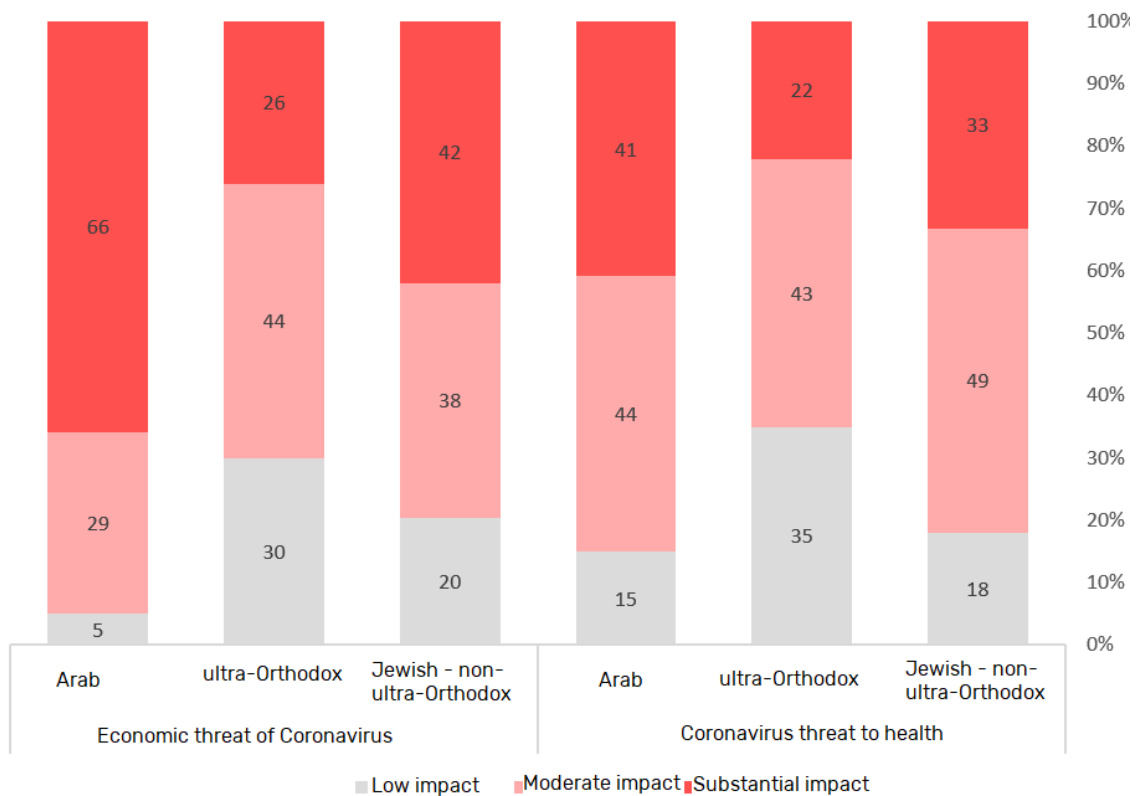
In Israel as elsewhere, the spread of Covid-19 poses significant challenges – health, economic, and social. The virus itself does not distinguish between people based on ethnic origin, religion, or skin color. Its effect on society, however, is felt unequally. Moreover, the public response to the crisis and accompanying restrictions raise many questions about its potential impact on relations between different groups, notably Jewish/Arab and secular/Haredi.

A recently conducted series of studies by **aChord: Social Psychology for Social Change** and the PICR research lab at the Hebrew University examined perceptions and feelings currently dominant in Israeli society both vis-a-vis the epidemic and toward various social groups in the context of the Coronavirus crisis. The findings presented here reflect the results of three research projects, led by Prof. Eran Halperin, Eli Adler, Dr. Nechumi Yaffe, Siwar Hasan-Aslih and Daan Vandermeulen, focusing on non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish society, ultra-Orthodox society, and Arab society. The research mapped levels of perceived threat among each group and examined the relationship between feeling threatened and levels of intergroup hostility.

Public perceptions of the Coronavirus

The research examined people's personal sense of threat from the virus both in terms of their health and economically. Among all the groups studied – Jews (non-ultra-Orthodox), ultra-Orthodox, and Arabs – the economic threat was perceived as the more serious of the two. At the same time, differences were found between the groups: Arab respondents, interestingly, felt a more serious threat level compared with Jewish respondents. In terms of health, 33% of the Jewish non-ultra-Orthodox population mentioned a serious sense of threat compared with 41% among Arabs. From an economic standpoint, the gap was even bigger: 42% of non-ultra-Orthodox Jews felt very threatened compared with 66% of Arabs. Researcher Siwar Hasan-Aslih notes that this finding is congruent with the “white male effect” in the United States, which describes the tendency of white males (the ruling majority group) to be less worried by risks as compared with women and minority groups, given the greater access for white males to more socioeconomic resources and their greater sense of control. Indeed, based on all the measures of threat and anxiety vis-à-vis the Coronavirus, women consistently reported a greater sense of threat than did men, and Arabs a greater sense of threat than Jews.

Meanwhile, interestingly, the sense of threat is lowest among the ultra-Orthodox, despite their being a minority. Dr. Nechumi Yaffe notes that “we know from prior studies that the ultra-Orthodox feel less anxiety than do other groups. The sense of threat is also connected with a phenomenon of faith-based immunity, and the close-knit families and close social support among the ultra-Orthodox reduce their sense of threat compared with other populations.”



Warning signs of rising hostility between groups

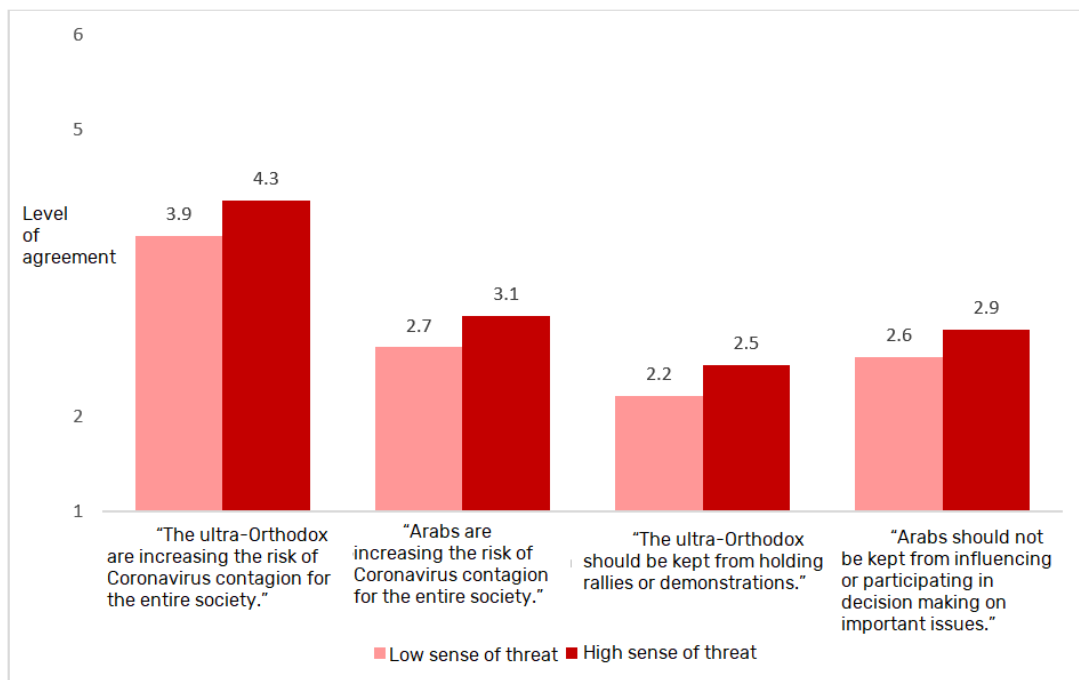
The implications of a feeling of threat also vary between the groups. In recent weeks, serious accusations have been levelled via both mainstream and social media about alleged noncompliance with Ministry of Health guidelines by various groups. The study examined how extensively the general public harbored such views. Findings indicate that the non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish public perceive the ultra-Orthodox as a much more significant threat in terms of the spread of the virus, much more so than Arabs. Of Jewish non-ultra-Orthodox respondents, 44% believe that the ultra-Orthodox are not following the guidelines properly, compared with 24% who believe the same thing about Arabs. And 44% believe that ultra-Orthodox noncompliance is making everyone else much more likely to be infected, compared with 17% who believe that about Arabs. Meanwhile, findings from ultra-Orthodox and Arab respondents indicate, based on self-reporting, that the vast majority (nearly 90%) of Arab and ultra-Orthodox respondents tend to follow the guidelines carefully.

Because in a crisis people typically show higher levels of anxiety and uncertainty, exposure to the Coronavirus and the sense of threat involved are liable to lead to changes in intergroup relations, exacerbating stereotypes and negative feelings. Among the Jewish (non-ultra-Orthodox) sample, respondents who *personally* knew someone ill with Covid-19 felt more threatened by Arabs in general and viewed them less tolerantly as compared with people not personally acquainted with someone who had contracted the virus. Meanwhile, those same people also held *more* tolerant views of the ultra-Orthodox. One possible explanation for this is that, in high-pressure and anxiety-provoking situations, people tend to feel closer to those whom they define as members of their own group and greater hostility toward those they see as belonging to other groups. Accordingly, for most Jews in Israel the ultra-Orthodox (however different they may be) are viewed as members of the same in-group, while Arabs are part of an out-group.

Based on a combination of all the threats examined, Jewish non-ultra-Orthodox respondents who reported themselves highly threatened by the virus perceived the ultra-Orthodox and Arabs as more threatening, compared with respondents who reported themselves as less threatened by the virus. In responding to questions about whether members of these groups “increase the risk of contagion for the entire society” and “endanger the future and character of Israeli society,” non-ultra-Orthodox respondents more threatened by the virus reported a greater risk. A clear difference was also found between those who felt threatened versus those who did not feel threatened regarding the policies that should be taken with respect to these groups. **Respondents who felt more threatened expressed more support for preventing rallies or demonstrations by the ultra-Orthodox and were more likely to think that Arabs should be prevented from influencing or participating in decision making.**

These findings point to the danger of a sudden increase in the sense of threat among the public and should serve as a warning about negative social processes that appear during a crisis. These negative social processes can easily escalate unless steps are taken to prevent it. As things stand, the media bear a heavy responsibility to prevent the dissemination of generalized accusations, and political figures and civic organizations must initiate social processes to prevent deterioration of intergroup relations.

Differences between perceptions toward minority groups among non-ultra-Orthodox Jews reporting lesser versus greater feelings of threat about Covid-19



Room for optimism

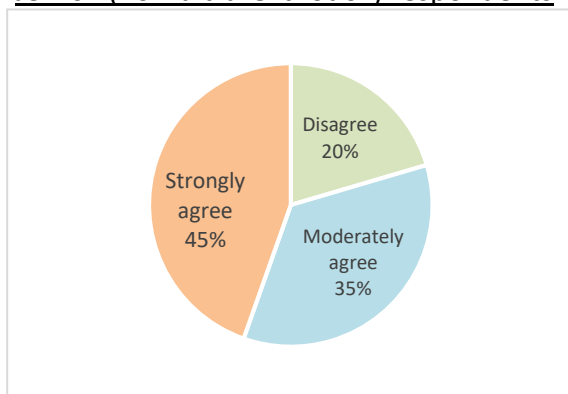
Problematic feelings aside, the findings of the research allow for optimism, too. **Many of the respondents see the Coronavirus crisis as a turning point, an opportunity to improve relations between the various groups in Israel.** This trend is mainly visible among minority groups. **The findings suggest that a greater sense of threat among ultra-Orthodox and Arab participants is in fact connected with more positive and optimistic attitudes toward a**

shared life. Arabs who reported feeling very threatened expressed a significantly higher level of agreement with the idea that Jews and Arabs in Israel share a common fate. Ultra-Orthodox respondents who reported feeling very threatened in the wake of this crisis expressed more hope about improving relations between them and secular people and were more optimistic that, following the Coronavirus crisis, there would be more unity in Israeli society.

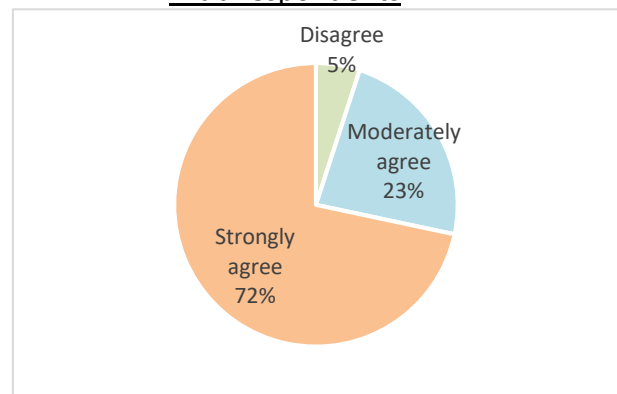
In addition, most of the respondents in the non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish sample stated that they view the Coronavirus crisis as an opportunity to improve relations and cooperation with Arabs (45% very much agreed and another 35% somewhat agreed), and 95% of Arab respondents found in the Coronavirus crisis a common mission for Jews and Arabs. **Clearly there is an urgent need to leverage this trend to create a new reality – transforming the crisis into an opportunity to promote relations based on greater equality and tolerance between the different groups in Israeli society.**

The Coronavirus crises is an opportunity to improve relations and cooperation between Jews & Arabs

The war against the epidemic is a joint mission for Jews and Arabs
Jewish (non-ultra-Orthodox) respondents



The war against the epidemic is a joint mission for Jews and Arabs
Arab respondents



Predictably under emergency conditions, the spread of Covid-19 has an impact on intergroup relations that demands attention from the public and from decision makers. Meanwhile, addressing the shared threat in this complicated time could create a window of opportunity to cultivate positive feelings of solidarity and partnership between the various groups. **The fact that a clear majority in Israeli society believes that the crisis is also a significant opportunity to improve relations and cooperation between the different groups is encouraging and lends credence to the assumption that divisive rifts and worsening disparities are not an inevitable consequence.** With suitable attention to all the groups in Israel, and if the right steps are taken, the public has the power to create solidarity and reduce inequality, thereby turning the crisis into an opportunity.

During recent weeks, the staff of aChord has developed content based on knowledge drawn from social psychology in order to help educators and decision makers in various fields to cope as constructively as possible with this complicated period. A [policy paper](#) based on the findings of extensive social psychology research addresses the potentially negative consequences of the Coronavirus epidemic on relations between groups in Israel, how such negative impact can be prevented, and how to leverage the crisis as an opportunity to

improve intergroup relations. In the realm of education, [online workshops and lesson plans](#) (Hebrew) were developed for educators. These cover the relations between groups in Israeli society during the Coronavirus crisis, reducing negative intergroup dynamics and helping teachers leverage the crisis opportunity to promote more equal, tolerant, and respectful intergroup relations while addressing concrete challenges that arose during the crisis.

In the realm of employment, two manuals were written: one, a [practical guide for managers in organizations](#) that offers practices and tools to buttress diversity and inclusion in the job market in response to changes in the economy and the workforce during the present situation; the other, to encourage fairness and inclusion in remote work, a [guide to online interviewing](#) that offers avenues for overcoming the unique obstacles facing candidates from diverse groups. All of this content can be found on the [aChord website](#).

The findings of the research discussed here are based on internet sampling of a non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish sample comprising 647 respondents, an ultra-Orthodox sample comprising 332 participants, and an Arab sample comprising 120 participants. The data were collected during the sampling project and analyzed by the aChord staff and excellent researchers mentioned above.